

# BRITAIN

## The treason of Geoffrey Prime

Britain's latest and possibly most disgraceful spy scandal, which broke into the open with the conviction this week of Geoffrey Prime at the Old Bailey, was not even unearthed by the professional spy-catchers of whose work Prime made a mockery for 14 years. The chronology of his disgrace is below. On Wednesday, the Lord Chief Justice sentenced Prime to 35 years for spying and three years for molesting young girls. It was only after ordinary policemen of the West Mercia force had detected his sexual crimes that his spying came to light.

Prime pleaded guilty. There was no contest in court, so the available facts of his treachery are only those which the security services have allowed to be known. But 35 years is a very long sentence indeed, and is a pointer to the gravity of his crime. In recent years, it has been exceeded for a spy only by the sentence given to George Blake, a Rus-

sian agent inside Britain's secret intelligence service, MI6. Blake got 42 years in 1961 and managed to escape in 1966.

Lord Chief Justice Lane said Prime had done "incalculable harm". That seems to put him in the league of the British diplomats, Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean, who defected to Moscow in 1951; Kim Philby, a top man in MI6 who headed for Russia in 1963 and is now a KGB general; or Anthony Blunt, unmasked in 1979 after a long career in public life (culminating in his appointment as master of the Queen's pictures), who now lives, disgraced, in London. Prime joins a long list of deplorable security breaches in Britain since Hitler's war—many at the heart of the country's security services.

The policemen who had traced three cases of sexual assault to Prime found in his house a card index of 2,287 young girls whom he had identified as potential



Prime time?

victims. They also found the whole paraphernalia of the cheap novel spy—one-time pads (the basis of unbreakable coded messages), microdot equipment, a short-wave radio, a briefcase with secret

### Prime's progress: 14 years a spy

**May, 1964:** Geoffrey Prime qualifies as Russian linguist while serving with Royal Air Force; posted to secret work at RAF Gatow in West Berlin.

**January, 1968:** offers his services to the Russians in Berlin out of "sympathy for the Soviet regime".

**January-July, 1968:** provides Russians with RAF secrets in Berlin.

**July, 1968:** leaves RAF, employed as Russian linguist in British intelligence.

**August, 1968:** returns to East Berlin for "extensive training in the arts of the spy".

**September, 1968:** joins the foreign office in London fully equipped as a Russian agent (code-name: "Rowlands") receiving instructions by radio.

**1974:** second positive vetting by British intelligence. Re-equipped and paid by Russians.

**Spring, 1975:** promoted by British and cleared for access to more sensitive material.

**September, 1975:** travels to Vienna with top secret material for the Russians, who

give him further briefing and more pay.

**March, 1976:** transferred to government communications headquarters (GCHQ) at Cheltenham.

**May, 1976:** returns to Vienna for further Russian briefing; receives £1,000, offer of a pension and rank of colonel in the KGB if he ever decides to defect.

**November, 1976:** promoted to section head at Cheltenham with access to "matters of the utmost secrecy".

**June, 1977:** marries for the second time.

**September, 1977:** decides to defect but changes mind: instead resigns post at GCHQ, taking 500 photographs of top-secret documents.

**April 10, 1980:** makes sexual attack on 11-year-old girl in her parents' home in Gloucester.

**April, 1980:** Russians invite him to Vienna.

**May, 1980:** travels to Vienna with his 500 photographs and spends three days being debriefed on a Russian cruise ship on the Danube; given £600.

**May 28, 1981:** makes violent sexual

attack on 13-year-old girl in her parents' home in Worcestershire.

**November, 1981:** flies to Berlin for further debriefing at Potsdam; returns to England with £4,000 and further supplies of espionage equipment.

**April 21, 1982:** makes sexual attack on 14-year-old Hertfordshire girl.

**April 27, 1982:** is interviewed by police, who have traced his car as being that of suspected child molester. Denies everything, later confesses to his wife.

**April 28, 1982:** telephones Hereford police to admit the sexual attack; is arrested and admits all three attacks on girls.

**May, 1982:** shopped by his wife. Home searched: a top-secret document, code pads, radio and other espionage equipment found.

**June 8, 1982:** first interview on suspicion of espionage by West Mercia police; continues denials at further interviews on June 11th and June 25th.

**June 26, 1982:** confesses to espionage, thereafter co-operates fully with the authorities.

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bits and pieces and even some highly-sensitive documents from General Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), the government listening post at Cheltenham in Gloucestershire, for which Prime had formerly worked.

The Cheltenham headquarters, where Prime was employed as a senior Russian linguist, has for several decades collaborated closely with America's National Security Agency in the interception and analysis of communications and with the Canadians and Australians too. Between them, they vacuum the world's airwaves for anything, particularly from Russia, which would help the security of the west. Those allies now have good reason for any future lack of confidence in the value of collaboration with the British. Everything was wrong with Cheltenham's security.

First, the system of "positive vetting" of people in highly sensitive jobs failed. At present, 68,000 British government servants are subject to "pv" clearance. The process sounds exhaustive and looks for three faults: membership of, or sympathy with, subversive organisations; character defects laying the subject open to blackmail, and circumstances, such as family links, with potentially hostile countries. On two of these counts, Prime should have failed. But he was able to keep his sexual tastes hidden even from his wife.

Even security at the gate had clearly broken down at Cheltenham. Prime went in and out with his camera. He took 15 rolls of film of top secret documents when he resigned in September, 1977.

Political responsibility for all security matters lies with the prime minister. Prime's treachery spans three prime ministers: Wilson, Heath and Callaghan. The civil service advisers on these matters are the secretary of the cabinet and the directors general of MI5, which runs counter-espionage, and MI6 (which spies for Britain). The security commission gives general advice on all such matters. The commission's new chairman is Lord Bridge of Harwich, a law lord, and Mrs Thatcher has asked him to investigate the Prime affair.

Mrs Thatcher has been told that nobody else was working with Prime. That may be. There is dispute about the quality of the information he passed to the Russians. During the trial, American newspapers and television, unencumbered by Britain's sub judice rules, reported that his spying had been very damaging indeed. Mr Caspar Weinberger, the American defence secretary, said it was a "serious breach" but not a "catastrophe". Others below Mr Weinberger are less polite.

Prime was in a position to tell the Russians which of their messages were

being specially monitored by Britain and America. The Russians would then have been able to feed false information on these airwaves. They would also know which codes had been broken. Prime might even have been able to pass on any listening that GCHQ does on American communications.

Some optimists say that "need to know" rules would have limited what Prime actually knew. In practice, "need to know" does not limit information, because professionals love to talk to each other and to share information. It could also be that, as Prime continued to spy for more than three years after he left GCHQ, he was the link for the Russians

with another agent who was still inside the Cheltenham post.

In March, 1981, following allegation that the late Sir Richard Hollis, director general of MI5 from 1956 to 1965, had been a Russian agent, Mrs Thatcher asked the then members of the security commission (chairman, Lord Diplock) to review all security procedures and practices. On May 20th this year, the government published a reassuring summary of its findings and the government's acceptance of them. This was intended to close the shutters on Britain's security service for at least a decade. Now the search lights will be switched on, from both sides of the Atlantic.